[Life in the Harlem Markets]

Beliefs and Customs - Food and Drink. 9

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 West 135th Street, NYC

DATE December 28, 1938

SUBJECT LIFE IN THE HARLEM MARKETS

1. Date and time of interview

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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SUBJECT LIFE IN THE HARLEM MARKETS

The Harlem Market at three A. M. is a kaleidoscopic canvas of bright lights, scurrying figures and the dim outlined silhouettes of trucks; baskets of fruit and many-sized crates of fresh vegetables. It is a part of New York little known and seldom seen by any persons other than those who make their living there; yet, it is vitally important to the daily welfare of more than half the population in all the surrounding community.

Walking through the dark streets in the early morning one notices the main roadway that is filled on both sides with trucks, wagons and merchandise piled harem-scarem helter-skelter on the sidewalk awaiting delivery to the many retail stores and pushcart markets of Harlem. Around these trucks and in the warehouses surrounding them, a veritable army of workers sort and load the produce that must be delivered not later than nine o'clock in the morning.

All of this activity is the result of the commission-merchant business. This business came into existence when the peddlers found it increasingly difficult to put in their appearances at the markets 2 daily and carry on the bargaining with farmers who came there to dispose of their wares. Besides that, many of their stands were located so far away from the wholesale market that it was quite impossible for them to deliver their own merchandise.

They were forced to hire independent truckmen who charged them exhorbitant rates and made it virtually impossible for them to make a descent profit from the sale of their goods. The commission-merchants who owned their own trucks were able to offer them at a reduced rate providing the peddlers bought their produce from the “middle-men”. They were also able to save the peddler from two or three hours each day by relieving him of the responsibility of coming to the market, shopping around for his merchandise and usually going back to his stand so tired that he was unable to work. The peddlers, realizing this, eventually gave up going to the markets themselves or sending their truckmen. They found it very convenient to let the commission-merchants do their shopping for them. When this became customary, the commission-merchants immediately increased their prices to a rate that yielded them more net profits than the farmer who originally produced the foodstuffs or the peddler who sold it to the customer.

Being the “middle-man”, they discovered, was far more profitable than being either the producer or retailer. The commission-merchant, for instance, buys a complete wagon-load of fruits and vegetables from the farmer and sells it at a considerable profit to the peddlers and storekeepers. Sometimes they are able to make especially good bargains with the farmers by purchasing huge lots outright and 3 selling them at the regular price to the retailers. On these days, they make what is coloquially known as a “killing.” They, to a great extent, corner the market on certain rare fruits or vegetables that are then in demand and sell them at such high rates that it is almost impossible for the peddler to buy. Yet he cannot refuse to buy because customers demand the article. Therefore he is forced to carry it as a part of his stock.

Many peddlers have corroborated this fact, and Louis Feldstein, a pushcart peddler of the Eighth Avenue market who has been in business for thirteen years, ably explained and offered proof for this fact. He explained that when he is able to go to the market (where the farmers congregate) he is very often able to buy merchandise at almost one-half the price he ordinarily pays for it. This is especially true when the farmer has been in the market all night and is anxious to go home. He might be willing to let a large lot of produce go for only

a small part of what the wholesale price for that day would be. The commission merchants are also alert for these bargains. It is then that they are able to make their best profits for, even though they are able to buy cheaply, they always sell at the current market price. For instance, they might buy five or ten thousand carrots at a half-cent each and sell them for one and one-half cents a piece. The peddler, in turn, will sell these same carrots at the rate of ten cents a bunch (five in a bunch), or two cents each, which means that he only makes a profit of one-half cent on them while the commission merchant realizes a clear 4 profit of one cent on each carrot. These figures, of course, are only comparative but they are accurate enough to give the reader a fair idea of how these transactions are carried out.

The farmers and the pushcart peddlers spend long hours of hard work producing and passing this merchandise on to the consumers, but the middle-man are really the ones in the tri-cornered deal who benefit most by the transaction. There are times, of course, when the peddler is ambitious enough to save the middle-man's fee on his purchases. At such times, he rises early (about three o'clock in the morning) goes to the market, bargains with the farmers and hires an independent truckman to deliver his goods. The tariff on trucking, incidentally, is greatly reduced in comparison to what it used to be. For this reason, it is to the peddler's advantage to do his own buying and later hire an independent truckman to make deliveries for him. The current price on deliveries runs from eight to ten cents per crate or basket.

The commission-marchants, in order to meet the competition of these new, low prices, have (in the cases of many old customers) resorted to free or half-price delivery. Only the larger firms are able to afford this, however, because of the high cost of gasoline and oil, not to mention the wear and tear on their trucks. The independent truckmen seem to feel, however, that this is only a temporary measure and are confident that the commission merchants, if they continue this policy, will only increase the price of merchandise.

At 102nd Street near the East River, the farmers congregate in a separate market of their own where the buyers from the wholesale houses as well as the itinerant pushcart peddlers come to bargain with them. Many of the farmers come there (in summer) as early as eight or nine o'clock at night and remain there as late as seven or eight o'clock the next morning. It is at this time that the individual peddlers have an opportunity to shop for themselves. In winter, it is different. The farmers come at about three or four o'clock in the morning, dispose of their produce and leave immediately. At this season of the year, the peddlers make less profit than usual because they are forced to buy at standard market prices. The only thing that keeps prices down is the fact that practically all of the commission merchants, with the possible exception of a very few, are individual dealers.

- - - - - - - - MARKET PERSONALITIES PATSY, THE ADAPTABLE : Patsy Randolph is undoubtedly one of the most unusual and certainly the most unique pushcart peddler in the Eighth Avenue Market.

Unlike the average peddler there, she has no specialty, such as fruits and vegetables, but sells any and every kind of product that she feels is seasonally the most valuable and desirable. There are times when she peddles cooking utensils, cosmetic products, odd and 6 damaged lots of men's and women's furnishings or thoroughly blackened canned goods bought wholesale or at fire-sales. Her current product, however, is the most unusual of all. She is selling pickles, pepper-sauces, spices and relishes exclusively. The pickles she makes and packs herself.

The biggest seller of this entire lot, incidentally, happens to be pickled watermelon rind. Her profits on this Southern delicacy amount to something well over 95% because the rinds cost her absolutely nothing. She has obtained the permission of store owners who sell individual five and ten cent slices at their street stands, to collect all the rinds she wants from their baskets. At the height of the summer season, she takes these rinds home, prepares and packs them in fruit jars and sells them to a highly appreciative buying

public that has long since been accustomed to this fine “down-home” dish that adds a tasty flavor to meats, especially roast pork or the more widely favored pork chops.

The secret of her sales success for this particular product, she says, depends entirely upon the way it in prepared, and as further proof of her versatility, she offers the following recipe as permanent proof of her claim to the title: “Best-maker-of-pickled-watermelon-rinds-in-Harlem.”

“This pickle is very easy to prepare,” she declared. “First you scoop out all the remaining red meat from the inside of the rind. Now peel the thin green rind from the outside. Cut the white rind into small cubes and cover with water that has been salted, two teaspoons of salt to the pint. Leave the rind in the water for an hour or two, while you prepare this syrup:

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“Add a quart of cider vinegar to two pounds of brown sugar. Add two tablespoons of whole cloves and a few small sticks of cinamon. You can also add a few raisins as an additional flavoring and dressing. You don't have to, of course, but they help to round out the flavor. Bring this liquid to a slow boil. Afterwards, drain the brine from the melon rind and rinse them with fresh, cold water. Add the melon rind to the syrup and let it cook until tender. Guard against letting it get too soft, though. You can find this out by sticking it with a fork.

“When the rind is tender, put it in fruit jars and pack them tightly. Now re-heat the syrup and pour it boiling into the jars over the rind. Add a few cloves to each jar. Be sure and seal the jars tightly. This keeps them from spoiling and protects the good, home-made flavor.”

- - - - - - POPULAR SOUTHERN FOODS YAMS : Located at frequent intervals in the heart of the Eighth Avenue market, there are more than a dozen stoves on wheels that indicate to the neighborhood shopper another stand dedicated to the preparation of good old Southern yams. The number of these street stoves is also sufficient proof of the fact that yams (baked, candied 8 or fried) rate exceptionally high with housewives of the

neighborhood who, because of long hours on their jobs, find it difficult to do their own baking of this ever-popular delicacy of the old South.

A recent interview with operators of these stands revealed the fact that baked yams are purchased in great numbers not only by the potato-loving Negroes from Dixie, but also by the many buxom black women hailing from one of the several West Indian Islands. Even in those remote corners of the globe the popularity of the lowly sweet potato has achieved a new market-high. The vendors were almost unanimous in their explanation of the reason why so many people prefer buying their yams in the market in preference to preparing them at home. It was pointed out that in order to keep their gas bills down to normal, many of these women who might enjoy cooking their own yams refrain from doing so for reasons of economy. Besides that, it is usually late in the afternoons when the majority of these housewives leave their service jobs in various sections of the city. When they arrive at home, it is too late to do much cooking, even if they would like to. Another reason offered for street purchases was explained as follows:

“Well, you see, a lot of these single men and women who are roomers in other people's apartments have little chance for cooking and even if they did, the landlady wouldn't want them to cook any food (especially anything that had to be baked) that used up so much gas. Besides that, it's too much trouble to the average man or woman to be bothered with cooking things like that when they can be bought so cheap. That's the may we keep in business. We sell our yams so 9 cheap that it don't pay for the people to cook them at home. The extra trouble is worth the few extra cents they'd have to pay for enough for a good meal.”

Inquiries about the production of the potato crops yielded the following information: That North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia are the biggest producers of the more or less famous yellow yams. Virginia, however, has championship claims on the production of giant white yams that are so popular in that section of the country prior to and during the Christmas holiday season. And speaking of the holiday season brings to mind “potato-

pone” (pronounced, “p'teter peon” in Georgia). This unique dish is a holiday delicacy that is enjoyed in the home of the poorest person at Christmas time. This does not mean, however, that it is monopolized entirely by the poor. In the homes of the old gentry, it is served and eaten with gusto. The final product is somewhat similar in taste to well seasoned potato-custard pie but it contains so much nutmeg and other spices that it emerges from the oven with a dark, muddy color faintly reminiscent of overdone bread pudding. This unappetizing color in no way detracts from the fine flavor and palatability of this down-home concoction, however, and the dish, within the past few years has achieved surprising popularity in Harlem. It was first introduced, locally, by natives of Georgia who migrated to New York during the sudden post-war migration of Negroes from all parts of the South to various cities in the East and Mid-West. New Yorkers ate it first with much misgiving but ended up by pleasantly surprising their hostesses by asking for second helpings. The recipe was 10 passed around from one person to another until today this dish alone is second in Harlem to hogshead or pigtails-peas-and-rice as a Christmas holiday dish. In the markets, the yam vendors who are enterprising enough to make their own potato-pons at home, bring it to their stands and keep it warm on top of their ovens, find a ready sale for all they can supply. In fact, the demand is far greater than the available supply.

The popularity of the potato is further attested to by the fact that the sweet potato was one of the first of the market products to inspire a popular market song exclusive to Harlem. It was included in a previous report. The name of it is: “Th' Sweet Pertater Man.” The lyric, composed by Heaven knows whom, extolls the hugeness and the delicious flavor of the potatoes sold on his, “John Peddler's,” stand. It is typically expressive of the merits and popularity of this vegetable that, in Uptown New York, is not just another dish for the table but a glorified delicacy of the first order.